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A Question of Faith

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WHEN America's National Council of Churches (NCC) organized a "peace invasion" of the Soviet Union by 266 Christians this past June, the visitors were given a grossly distorted advance briefing.

A prominent part in the briefing was played a "documentary" film produced jointly by the NCC and NBC News, a film that mirrors the Soviet propaganda message on church-state relations in Russia. Though there was emphasis on pre-trip reading, the most complete and up-to-date material did not figure on the recommended reading list. Missing, for example, was 100 pages of confidential reports by Vasily Furov, deputy head of the Soviet government's Council on Religious Affairs, the agency that oversees religious groups in the Soviet Union. These reports, obtained from a "mole" in the Soviet religious establishment and in wide circulation in the West, gives chapter and verse on the strict government controls and manipulation of Soviet church groups — directly contradicting the NCC's message stressing the freedom of Christian churches in Russia.

Thus the group's eyes were not opened in advance to many realities, for example, to the Furov reports' references to foreigners. One of these references reads: "The demands we make on clergy permitted to have contacts with foreigners are increasing in connection with the growing number of foreign tourists," some of whom show interest in the position of the church. "It should be stated that for the most part (the clergy) justify this trust." Further helpful reading would have been Father Gleb Yakunin's elaboration of this theme, documenting specific episodes of manipulation of foreigners by the KGB-related external department of the Orthodox Church. Father Gleb, an Orthodox priest in Moscow, headed the unofficial Christian Committee to Defend Believers' Rights, collecting evidence in the late Seventies of official interference in church affairs.

Without this background, it is not surprising that independent-minded members of the group felt let down by the formal nature of most of their meetings in the Soviet Union. They were also annoyed by the subtle means used (not always successfully) to prevent informal meetings from taking place at all. In one case, the Rev. Bruce Rigdon, the NCC official

who led the "peace invasion," told a journalist that there would be plenty of opportunities to interview both Soviet officials and ordinary people on the trip, then later said that no interviews could be had except from Russians participating in the official meetings: Mr. Rigdon had given in to a Soviet request to impose this ban.

As for normal discussions, the Rev. William Howland of Washington reported that "when we got the chance to ask probing questions, which was not often, we got canned, predigested replies. And we got the same ones everywhere we were allowed to ask the questions." Many of the visitors were dismayed by the pomp and ceremony of the official meetings, and the constant Soviet attempts — through luxurious receptions and lavish flattery of the group's leaders — to head off genuine dialogue.

Many were equally dismayed by the response of the group's leaders to the demonstration specially mounted for the Americans, at great risk, in a Moscow church: The banners of the demonstrators drew attention to the mounting persecution of the U.S.S.R.'s Baptist community. In particular, the Rev. John Lindner, Mr. Rigdon's deputy, tried to prevent some of the visitors from listening to the story of Vera Zinchenko, whose husband had just been sentenced to three years' imprisonment. Later, at the group's end-of-trip press conference in Moscow, he expressed public annoyance that the demonstration had taken place at all.

In choosing to organize this press conference, Mr. Rigdon had every reason to plan it carefully so that the group's message would be unambiguous and difficult to distort. After he visited Russia in 1982, an article by a senior state official put crude pro-Soviet propaganda into Mr. Rigdon's mouth, and his letter of correction was ignored. This time, the message must indeed have been clearer, for Soviet and Western reporters heard roughly the same things. *Izvestia*, for example, quoted Mr. Rigdon as saying that the visitors had "completely satisfied their interest regarding the position of the churches," and continued: "During the press conference and in conversations, members of the delegation repeatedly stated their view that the church in the U.S.S.R. is not persecuted." And the *New York Times* man summed up the speakers' remarks as express-

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ing "praise for the status of religion in the Soviet Union and condemnation of the United States role in the arms race."

Two days later, at the group's press conference in New York, Mr. Rigdon went further, and forecast the future. "Those of our number who had been in the Soviet Union before," he said in a typewritten opening statement, "have witnessed certain improvements in the situation of the religious communities. We remain optimistic that this trend will continue."

It is clear that the delegation leaders did not even try to give a balanced account of the religious situation — despite having a fine opportunity to do so.

Alongside gratitude for hospitality, appreciation of the many meetings, and acknowledgement of recent concessions made to the Orthodox Church, they could also, at a minimum, have expressed Christian solidarity with the imprisoned Gleb Yakunin; with nearly 200 Baptists currently in jail (up from 35 in 1979); with the recently sentenced Roman Catholic priests and the 123,000 Lithuanians who have braved official threats to speak out for them; with their fellow priest who was murdered in a "car accident" for monitoring Soviet observance of the Helsinki Final Act; with the 3-million-strong Uniate Church and the other denominations which are still outlawed and function only underground; with the persecuted Ukrainian committee which — defying the Kremlin's steady hardening of most of its religious policies since 1979 — has been seeking the legalization of the Uniates; with the tens of thousands of Jews and Pentecostals who have been callously barred from emigration for years, and now, since 1982, have seen the Iron Curtain put back in place more firmly than at any time since Stalin; and with the Seventh Day Adventists, whose much revered leader recently died in a labor camp at the age of 84.

But no! Not an ounce of Christian compassion was available from the NCC for these believers. Worse still, it was apparently thought desirable actually to discourage anyone from helping them, by giving the impression that there really was no discrimination or persecution at all! True, a few Baptists had been jailed, but — an NCC press release implied — they deserved their fate because they had refused to register with the state. (In reality, they have always wanted to register, if the government would stop violating its own constitutional principle about the separation of church and state.)

At the Moscow press conference, where three more NCC exchanges with the Soviet Union were announced to begin next month, Mr. Rigdon also said of U.S. and Soviet Christians: "We are called to symbolize something for which the world hungers. In its simplest form, it's that we can trust each other." But does he really believe he can trust the people who gave the "canned replies" about peace, or the Orthodox leaders who lied to him? Does he really think these leaders took helpful action when (as he reported later in New York) he delicately inquired of them in private about religious dissidents?

Mr. Rigdon said in New York that "Soviet and American Christians pledged to work together in the cause of peace, seeking to lower the causes of fear and mistrust. We will do this here at home, and our counterparts will do so in the Soviet Union."

When I asked Mr. Rigdon if he really thought that the Soviet churches would now start lobbying the Politburo, and that the Politburo would be influenced, he conceded this was unlikely. As for these American Christians influencing the U.S. government, the government seems unlikely to be swayed by a group which the Soviet news agency TASS can happily report as having put "the responsibility for the escalation of the arms race" on the United States. Such a development seems even less likely when the group's leader, Mr. Rigdon, turns out to be on the board of the Prague-based Christian Peace Conference, a Soviet front-organization whose political stance does not deviate from that of the Kremlin.

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